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UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

DATE: 1983

SELECTED SHORT STORIES

By

William C. McLaughlin

B.A., University of Montana, 1971

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

1983

Approved by:

Rich R. Marinis
Chairman, Board of Examiners

[Signature]
Dean, Graduate School

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OLD JOHN

Old John awoke. Fresh, alert, from slumber to wakefulness with no rough transition. Reaching to the window, he pulled the shade aside and watched the light rain that had been falling since late last night. There'd be no work today. Couldn't put up hay if the darned stuff was wet, and it was going to be wet today. He put up the shade and lay back, lighting his first cigarette, watching the smoke curl into the darkness of the room, washing over the faded wallpaper. The Boss had been upset when the storm split to the South and carried directly over the section they were working on. Nothing to do about it. Most of the Summer had been dry and the bulk of the hay was up. Only about a week's work left and the crew had whooped when the clouds had broken over them, knowing that they would finally get a day off. Four weeks straight they'd been putting up hay, seven days a week, twelve to fourteen hours a day. Kind of rough on Sundays when the men had been to town all the night before and had to work off those hangovers in the hot early morning sun. John smiled. They were a good crew. The quitters were gone the first week. The men who couldn't, or wouldn't make it. The boys who were just too young, who missed home. The boomers who didn't have all their drinkin' out of their systems. The rest were good. The older men kept an eye out for the boys and the boy's enthusiasm made the work go easier. Of course, he wasn't too sure how good an idea it was for the older men to buy beer for the boys when they all went to town on Saturday night, but, shoot, the boys had earned a good time and there wasn't a heck of a

lot more for them to do in a small cowtown anyway. Drink and fight a little and make it back to the bunkhouse for a couple of hours sleep before the breakfast bell sounded in the darkened mornings. Their drinking didn't hurt anyone as far as he could see.

Old John snubbed out the butt of his cigarette and, throwing back the covers, stepped onto the cold wooden floor and pulled on his Levi's. He got out a fresh pair of woolen socks and pulled his boots on over them. It's cool this morning, he thought. Better get a fire goin' in the bunkhouse in case the boys are cold. He put on a wool shirt and buttoned it up to the neck. Opening the door, he walked quickly across the dim barnyard to the cookhouse and went through the squeaking screen into the warmth of fresh coffee, the heat of the grill.

"Mornin', Marcie. How are you this mornin'?"

"Why, good mornin', John. You're looking chipper for such a rainy mornin'! Go to town last night?"

"No, ma'am! I'm too old for trips to town every time it rains. Are the boys back yet?"

"Well, some of the older ones were back about midnight, but Whitey and Don and the young ones are still gone. They should be pulling in soon. The boss told them to check in this morning to see about work times."

Marcie handed John a fresh cup of coffee, steaming and black, and he sat down at the long table to sip at it. He was a small man, grizzled and tough, a shock of white hair and a couple of days growth on his face. He cupped his hands around the hot coffee as if to warm them.

"I don't figger the'll be much work today. It rained all last night and even if it quits soon there'll be no haying until tomorrow morning at the soonest."

"You're probably right, John. The Boss was in about fifteen minutes ago and said that he was headed for the upper ranch. If the weather's been the same there it'll be a full day off for the boys."

John finished his coffee and rose from the table.

"I'd better start a fire in the bunkhouse, Marcie. What time are you plannin' breakfast?"

"It'll be late, John. Probably about eight o'clock."

"Thanks, Marcie. I'll tell the boys."

He walked back across the barnyard, cutting left to the bunkhouse which stood just down from his own small cabin. Opening the door, he smelled stale whiskey staining the air from last night's drinking. He went to the wood box and took out kindling and newspaper and walked with it to the potbellied stove in the middle of the large, single room. The grate clanked as he lifted it and set it aside. He stuffed in the newspaper, put the kindling on top, and placed a couple of good sized pieces of firewood on top of that. The match blazed in the cool dampness of the room and the paper caught brightly. He put the grate back with a clank that muffled through the room.

"That you, John?"

"Good mornin', Fred, how're you?"

"Fine, John. What time is it?"

"Bout six. It's still rainin' though."

"Whew! That means we can sleep awhile, huh?"

"Yep. The Boss headed for the upper ranch and Marcie doesn't plan breakfast until eight. Did the boys say what time they'd be comin' in this mornin'?"

"They said they'd be in for late breakfast. They were doin' quite a bit of drinkin' and hell-raisin' though. They had Whitey and Don right

along with them, drinkin' outside of Fetty's. They'd just bought the boys some beer and dumped them outside town about the time we left."

"They'll probably make it then, long as they got Don and Whitey with them."

John warmed his hands at the stove and put a couple of more pieces of wood on the fire. He turned to the door and started out.

"See you at breakfast, John."

The rain had slowed to a light drizzle when he went back across the yard. He went through the small doorway cut into the barn door. The tractors had been put in the barn yesterday when the rain had driven the men in from the fields. The barn was warm from the hay and animals who were kept in the back. John checked the spares in the rake box to make sure there were plenty of rake teeth to replace those broken the day before. Damned if most of the men didn't bust at least three during a day's work. There was nothing to do about it, though.

The ground was rough close to the river bottoms and there was no other way to gather the hay. The Boss got a little mad sometimes if the men were breaking too many teeth. He checked cutting blades for the mowers, and satisfied that everything needed for repairs was there, he took up a bucket from its shelf, picked up a small stool, and went to the back to milk for breakfast.

Leaving the barn with the bucket of warm milk, he went obliquely to the spring-house to let it cool for an hour before the meal. He closed the small door and walked toward the cook-house when he heard the sound of a truck coming from the direction of the upper ranch. He waited, listening, as the rain continued to slow, light starting up more

and more certainly in the East. The truck came into view pulling strongly down the dirt road, slowly at the last moment to make the turn through the main gate. The Boss braked in front of the cook-house and jumped from the cab.

"Good mornin', John! It's a wet son-of-a-bitch all the way from here to past the upper ranch. Rained all damned night. Probably rained down the whole valley. There'll be damned little hay stacked today. Come on and have a cup of coffee with me."

They went into the cook-house where the smell of bacon greeted them. Marcie was getting things together for breakfast and the big pot of coffee was bubbling on the stove.

"Good morning, Dick. How are you this morning?"

"Morning, Marcie, I'm fine, fine. Looks like you'll be the only one working around here today!"

"I don't mind. The men have to eat. Are you hungry?"

"I'll wait 'til it's time for the rest to eat. Thank you."

Old John had poured two steaming cups and brought them to the table. The Boss was looking through the small notebook he always carried with him. It had his totals for hay already stacked and how much more to be done before the job was finished.

"Goddammit, John, we've been mighty lucky this season. This is the first lay-off because of rain and we're three-quarters done already. The men needed a day off though, time to get themselves good and drunk. Are they all back from town?"

"Some of the old ones are back, Boss. The boys and Don and Whitey are still gone. Should be back soon."

"Those damned kids! I keep waiting for a call in the middle of the

night from the Sheriff telling me he's got them all tucked away in a cell somewhere. Guess if they're with Don and Whitey they're all right. Christ, those two're worse than the kids. Oh well, as long as they have a good time and don't hurt themselves."

He leafed through the notebook, swearing now and then, making entries and erasures as he went. The heat from the range radiated through the room, an accompaniment to Marcie's humming.

"I'll see you at eight. Have to go over to the house and check on Marge and the kids."

He gulped his coffee, pushed back the bench, and headed out the door, buttoning his coat as he went. The door slammed. John helped Marcie set the table for breakfast, placing utensils at each setting, filling one of the salt shakers which had almost emptied. At twenty-to-eight he heard a truck pull up in the yard accompanied by a chorus of yells and hoots.

"Hot damn! Sure hope we're in time for breakfast!"

"Wake up, Mike, you lazy bastard, we're home!"

They tumbled out of the bed of the pick-up, some falling as they landed, others wobbling a bit to gain their balance on the wet, hard earth. The cab opened and Don stepped down, closed the door, and fell on his backside in the wet and mud of the yard.

"Haw! Look at that, would you? And he's going to take care of us and see we get home all right! Maybe we'd better get someone to take care of him!"

"Would you guys, for just one minute at the end of this horrible evening, get off my back and help me up?" said Don.

A couple of the boys grabbed him under the arms and helped him to his feet. He was a big man, heavy, dark under the brim of the stained

straw hat, young, competent. Whitey had gotten out of the other side of the cab and came around to where the boys were standing, laughing at Don.

"Now leave Don alone, you guys, you're still drunk and you'd better shape up before the Boss or his Missus sees you."

John had come out of the cook-house and now stood watching the late comers with a look of feigned disgust, mirth, and amusement.

"Well, I see you boys finally decided to give us the pleasure of your company. Right nice of you to show up for breakfast. Figured that might be the only reason you'd show up this time of the mornin' at all."

"Hiya, John, how's it goin'?"

"You're lookin' mighty dapper, John!"

"John we missed you in town. Had a sweet little thing all lined up that swore she'd only fall for an older man!"

"That's right, John, she wouldn't even look at Whitey, said that'd be like robbin' the cradle!"

"Aw, get off it, you guys," said Whitey.

They all laughed and punched at Whitey, stomping around to keep their feet warm.

"Now quit foolin' around," said John, trying to sound stern, "go over to the bunkhouse and clean yourselves up and wash for breakfast. Boss says he'll talk to all of you 'bout whether or not we'll be working today."

"Hell, there ain't goin' to be no work today, John. It's still drizzling a little bit."

"Well, why don't we let the Boss decide that. Go on now, get yourselves cleaned up."

John motioned Whitey aside as the rest shuffled laughing toward the bunkhouse to wash and shave for the morning meal.

"I see you brought everybody back all right, Whitey."

"Yah. Everything's fine, John. We just raised a little hell for the evening. Sheriff Thatcher threatened to throw Don in the hoosegow if we didn't get the kids out of town, but we bought him a drink and smoothed things over."

"What got him so upset? He's usually pretty cool."

Whitey hitched up his pants and spit some of the tobacco he was chewing onto the ground. He pushed his hat back away from his forehead exposing a little of the snow-white hair that earned him his nickname even though he was only thirty-seven.

"Well, we bought the kids a couple of cases of beer and dropped them a few miles outside of town to drink. We came back about three hours later and they were all over the damned fields. Took us fifteen minutes to round them up. We drove back to town and told them to stick close to the car 'cause we'd be goin' directly. Half an hour later the Sheriff came into Fetty's and told Don that three of 'em was at the Antler's doin' the shit-kicker's-stomp to the juke-box and one of 'em's standin' in the middle of the street screamin' 'We want a screw', so we bought 'em another case of beer, loaded 'em back into the car, and dumped 'em outside of town again. About an hour after that, the Sheriff came back into Fetty's. Apparently they'd walked to town and were trying to start a fight with some boys in the Antler's. Sheriff told Don to get 'em out of town or spend the rest of the night in jail."

"God Almighty. And knowin' Don's temper too. Was he a little upset?"

"A little upset? Jesus! He threatened to punch the Sheriff. Asked him if those goddamned kids looked like they was related to him. Said as far as he was concerned their parents were responsible for them, not him, and to leave him the hell alone about it. Sheriff threatened to hit

Don with a sap. Don offered his head and said the second shot was his. Pat the bartender managed to get 'em both calmed down. By this time we saw that the boys had a brawl started across the street. Christ! People fightin' all over the place over there. We could see some of the boys standin' around the edges, jumpin' and laughin', duckin' in now and then to grab a sneak punch and duckin' back. I swear to God, I think they're crazy sometimes!"

"I think maybe you're all crazy sometimes. Was anybody hurt?"

"No, no, just scratches and a few bumps. We went over, and between the two of us we got 'em all gathered up. They'd gotten a hell of a row goin', but we didn't let them stick around long enough to see the end of it. We put 'em in the truck and headed for Jackson."

"Oh no, you went to Jackson? What time was it?"

Whitey shrugged his shoulders as John rolled and lit a cigarette. The light grew brighter as they talked and the rain turned to mist.

"Well, it was about twelve-thirty by the time we got there. Don and I went into the Golden Wheel and told the boys to go ahead over to the Diamond Bar Inn and get themselves something to eat. Turned out they met a friend who had some beer, so they all drank some more. 'Bout one o'clock Mike came in and asked us to help him. He said that the boys had gone into the swimmin' pool over there, taken off all their clothes right there in front of families and all, and jumped into the pool naked. Christ! Guess there were women and kids yellin' and runnin' all over the place, mostly away!"

John folded his arms, lowered his head, and muttered something too softly for Whitey to hear.

"Well, anyway, the observation room was full of people, you know, it's got a glass window in front of a bunch of seats so's people can

watch the swimmin', and Paul gets on the divin' board and turns around facin' 'em and jumps up and down, stark naked, givin' 'em the finger. That cleared the observation room pretty fast. Tom says then Paul jumped into the pool and threw-up. Guess he changed the color of the water a little."

John was still shaking his head, but grinning a little. Whitey spit again and continued.

"That was about the time Mike came for us. Don said he might as well give up the idea of a peaceful evening. When we got over there people were all millin' around and upset. The boys had just gotten their clothes on and ducked out the back before Clancy busted in there with a couple of deputies. They pulled their hats down and came back in the front; the boys that is. So, there they were, standin' around with everybody else, talkin' about what a bunch of bastards whoever had done that nasty trick were. Don didn't know whether to laugh or cry or just give up or what. There was a big crowd at the dance though, and we were able to get them all out of there without bein' recognized. We figured it was high time to get the hell out of that town, so we drove over to the Circle Q and sat and drank and played cards with those boys for the rest of the night."

"God Almighty," said John, looking hard at Whitey, "did anyone know you boys were from here?"

Whitey grinned.

"No. Those damned kids told everyone they talked to that the fellers who'd been in the pool were from MacDowell's spread! There weren't even any of those fellers in town. We'd seen all of them in Wisdom! So the sneaky little buggers got off Scott free!"

John nodded, shook his head, dropped the cigarette to the ground and snuffed it with his boot.

"Why don't you go along then Whitey and make sure they're getting cleaned up and ready for breakfast."

"Sure will, John."

"Don't say anything to the Boss about this. The less he hears about it the better."

They parted, Old John going toward the cook-house, Whitey to the bunk-house. Don was laying on his bunk when Whitey entered the room. The boys had the radio going and a couple of them were harassing Don.

"Come on, Don, you're the big college man. You're supposed to be able to go all night, screw all the girls, drink all the whiskey. Bullshit!"

They all laughed.

"You midgets have been warned. I've been warning you since about four o'clock yesterday afternoon, I'm warning you again now, keep it up and I'm going to kick some half-sized asses."

"Aw, bullshit, Don! You're just mad because you didn't get to sit on your butt on a bar stool for seven straight hours last night. We keep your evenings filled with excitement. You ought to thank us!"

Don turned on his bunk away from the rest of the boys.

"Oh Lord. Giveth me patience to endure the slings and outrages of mine enemies who are both smaller and more ignorant than myself."

The triangle sounded for breakfast and Don dragged himself off the bed and followed Whitey and the boys to the cook-house. The Boss was already there, seated at the head of the table with his little boy. Talking and laughing, they seated themselves around the big oak table and Marcie served them heaped platters of hot food, eggs, steaks, potatoes,

hot mugs of coffee. They ate with good appetites, talked and told lies about their exploits, embellished for the Boss with a few fibs in order to keep him in good humor and unaware of what really went on. He didn't approve of a lot of the things the boys sometimes did, so they made it a point not to tell him anything that might get him upset.

While they were eating the rain stopped altogether and the sky showed signs of clearing to the West. The Boss spoke:

"I drove to the Upper Ranch this mornin' and it rained just as hard there as it did here yesterday. Was hopin' to be able to do some work today, but you all know that if we put that hay up wet we're just inviting a fire later on. So it looks like there'll be no hayin' done 'till tomorrow at the soonest."

There was a great deal of grinning and head nodding at the table.

"So, if you'll all check your rigs out this mornin', make any repairs that you need, and check your gas and oil, you can spend the rest of the day any way you see fit. I called the weather-man in Dillon and he said that it'd be sunny and clear for the rest of the week. I hope he's a right. That means we can get back to work just as soon as the sun burns the damp off the hay. By the way, it looks like some of you could use a little shut-eye this mornin'."

Some of the boys looked self-consciously at each other and laughed.

"Don't forget now, if you go to town this afternoon or evenin' I expect you to be ready to work in the mornin', I don't care how late you get in. You can be damned sure there'll be some ass chewed if anyone tries to dog it. All right?"

There was a general murmur of approval, the sound of boots scraping the floor.

"Let Marcie know if you're leaving, that way she can plan on how many to cook for. You all take it easy and we'll see you later."

After the meal they all cleaned up their plates and put them in the sink to be washed. The boys headed for the barn to make their repairs as quickly as possible so they could have the work done and the rest of the day free. John went along with them to make sure everything was done right and to check up on his own Ford 300. He found that he had lost two teeth in the previous day's haying and replaced them with newly painted green teeth from the rake box. His oil was all right, but he had to load about five gallons to top off the gas. He helped Paul finish his rake. The boy had lost four teeth and the bolts had rusted on one of his rake sections.

"Keep a little oil on the rake bolts, Paul, and they'll unlock for you a little easier."

"There's so damned much water along the lower fields, John, seems there's a little more rust everyday."

"Whitey tells me you boys did a little swimmin' last night. How was the water?"

Paul grinned, his face reddened.

"Come on, John. We were just a little drunk. You know. Sometimes you get carried away."

"I know. You know you should be a little more fair with people though. It's not fair to run around without any clothes on when there's families around."

"You're right, John. We'll try to do better next time."

John knew he wouldn't have to say anymore to the boy. He was good about learning from what happened and didn't usually need two lessons.

Old John took a look at Mike's Farmall Cub and checked the Boss'

buck-rake. By then the rest of the men had finished and he could hear water running in the shower. He saw that more wood smoke was beginning to rise from the bunk-house. He walked to the gate of the Main house, through it, and around to the kitchen door which he opened and entered.

"John! Come in! Sit down and I'll get you some coffee."

"Thank you, Marge, I'd appreciate it."

"Hi, John!"

"Mornin', Heidi, how are you, Honey?"

"Fine, thank you!"

Marge set the coffee down at the table and John took off his wool over-shirt and sat.

"What do you have planned today, John," said the Boss.

"Well, I thought it'd be a good idea to take a ride up toward the timberline on the East boundary. We put that new fencing in there a couple of months ago and I'd like to see how it's holding."

"Good. I've been meanin' to do that myself. You'll save me the trouble. Why don't you kids go out and take a ride on your ponies?"

The children ran out the back door, stopping long enough to put on the sweaters which hung on hooks next to the door.

"Can you make it back by two, John?"

"I think so."

"Good. Ed Glassey called and that part for the buck-rake came in yesterday. I'd like you to come in with me so you can see if he got the right thing this time. Marge, are you gonna need some supplies for the cook-house?"

"We need quite a bit, Dick."

"Okay. Call it in to the Mercantile and John and I'll pick it up at the same time. Would you like to go too?"

"No thanks, Honey. I told Marcie that I'd take care of cooking supper and she could take the day off after dinner."

"Good. She'll appreciate that. She works hard. I've got to run over to Clayton's and check on that sale he's gettin' up for next month. I'll see you at two, John."

He kissed Marge on the cheek and walked into the other room. John finished his coffee and put his over-shirt back on.

"Thank you, Marge. Be seein' you later."

"You're welcome, John, have a good day."

Old John walked around the side of the house and back out the gate, closing it. He went to his own cabin and made up the bunk and straightened the room, opening the window at the bottom to air out the room. Going to the barn, he found Sam at work on one of the tractors.

"Sam, will you saddle up that little sorrel for me while I pick up some grub and a rifle?"

Sam grinned amiably.

"Happy to, John. Are you goin' huntin'?"

"No, Sam, just gonna check some fence this mornin'."

Marcie fixed him some sandwiches and a thermos of coffee. He stopped for his rifle and some cartridges. The little mare was saddled and waiting, chewing the bit.

"Thank you, Sam. Good mornin', little girl. Ready for a ride this mornin'?"

He swung his leg over the little sorrel's back and coaxed her out of the yard, down the dirt road, stopping to open the gate leading into the east acreage, closing it after them. It was damned nice to get away for awhile. It was quiet most of the year, but it got a little crowded at haying time. It'd be nice to get up into that high-

sage country again. It reminded him of the chapparel country where he'd grown, the air clean, fresh, smelling sweetly of the sage. Might talk the Boss into stopping for a few beers this afternoon when the supplies were all loaded. Rather do my real drinkin' in the winter when you need a little fuel inside to keep you warm.

The little mare started to climb. John let her pick her own way. 'Nother week, ten days should see the hay up and the busy season over, then things could get back to normal, just Sam and the Boss and John to run the place. There were the three men at the Upper Ranch, but they spent most of the year up there, joining the others for the Spring drives and irrigation. They were a good bunch, all hard workers. He'd miss the summer crew, always did when they were a good crew, but there was something good about the cold and the lonely Winter nights. Something you couldn't really touch, but it was there.

He hunched a little forward as the mare began to climb, pacing steadily upward along the low trail. The foothills were covered with yellow wildflowers. The cattle hadn't grazed this section for a couple of years now and the grass had flourished. A little dry now and then, but still good grazing. John pulled his hat lower as the sun came stronger and brighter, rising higher ahead of him. A good, clean day. He'd have to keep at it steady if he was goin' to make it back by two sharp. Shouldn't be too difficult. If there were any breaks in the fence he'd jury-rig them and take a crew out for solid repairs right after hayin' was over. He gave the mare a little push and headed for the timber.

WOODY

"Finished with the bookwork?"

"Yah. Not too much tonight. Did you finish?"

"Sure. Just had to pull some preventive maintenance. Murphy's here now to cover; guess he might as well sit on his ass and watch circuits tonight instead of me."

"Was everything alright?"

"They were taking incoming at Pleiku and didn't want to communicate. Can't blame the poor bastards. Guess they were just trying to keep their asses down."

The two men walked through the black out curtain and then through the front door of the Communications Center. They were faced by a high revetment, aluminum siding framed by posts and two-by-fours. Filled with sand, they were three feet thick at bottom, tapering to less than two feet at top. They turned left and went around the corner of the building. Walking almost the whole length of the long structure, they stopped and the taller of them climbed onto one of the lower two-by-fours. He reached under one of the crossbeams at the top, pulled out a small plastic bag, and jumped back down to the ground.

"Did you get 'em?"

"No, sweat."

They went to the corner and turned it and were at the back of the building. There was a break in the barrier of about four feet. Another six feet past the break was a lone revetment which served to protect the part of the building exposed by the break. It stood solitary, bright in the moonlight. They went around it to the far side and seated themselves with their backs resting against the surface of the barrier. They were

facing South and could see Hon Tre Island rising from the bay to their left. The lights of the microwave outfit blinked red just below the summit of its center. Ahead and to their right a huge hill rose and at the top, in the moonlight, they could make out the sharp definition of the Hawk missile battery situated on the crest. Straight ahead gapped the ocean with the Southern Cross blazing and undulating above the horizon.

"Shall we split one?"

"Where'd you get 'em, Sam?"

"Downtown. They're Barbershop Bombers."

"Let's just split one to start, then."

The Barbershop was in the center of the Vietnamese village. You went around the side to the first door at the back. Going in, there was always a Mama San sitting on the bunk sorting and sifting a large box full of "Cambodian Red", some of the best marijuana available. Shipped in by the VC from Cambodia, they sold it to the Americans through the local Vietnamese. Everybody happy.

Sam cupped the glow of the match and lit the cigarette. Inhaling deeply, he passed it to Woody who did the same. The wind was blowing out to sea, carrying the fetid odor of damp jungle, raw red earth, and somewhere on the edge, human feces. The breeze was pungent, sweet, strangely invigorating. The moon was high overhead and threw little shadow. They could easily distinguish each others features clearly.

"Feels good."

"Ya, it does."

They smoked until the stub of the cigarette burned their lips. Woody snubbed it out. They relaxed, their senses heightening. It was quiet. They could hear dogs barking and some voices off to their

left on the other side of the fence toward the tarpaper village. Families of Vietnamese soldiers lived there. You could always get what you wanted there, girls, drugs, weapons, whatever. Not a good place to be late at night.

"Christ, I'm glad it's quiet tonight."

"Right on."

"You feel like talking?"

"Sure, Woody, that's what you said you wanted to do earlier."

Woody cleared his throat. "Well, I went to the Red Cross again this afternoon. That fucking guy gave me the same old goddamned run around. Told me that they were working on the problem. Must be patient. Waiting to get word from the States. Took him two fucking months to let me know that I'd need a statement from the Battalion Chaplain. That was easy, first and last time I'll see him I guess. But, two shittin' months. Sitting there, waiting to hear from the States on orders, two months and nothing's happening because that dingbat forgot to tell me that the Chaplain had to confirm the necessity and propriety of my fucking request. Goddamnit."

"Why don't you beat him up?"

"Come on. I can't do that. He's still the only one who can get me the hell out of here and home to marry Jean before the baby's born."

"Woody, I swear to God you sound like a fucking soap opera."

"Listen, you son of a bitch..."

"Okay, okay, take it easy." Sam laughed quietly, sympathetically.

"I'm just kidding you. You know I care about what happens. Keep a sense of humor."

Woody growled a little, then grinned.

"Okay."

They watched a three-quarter ton truck swing around the corner of their perimeter and cross in front of them, headed for the gate with blackout lights dimly illuminating the dirt road. They could see a couple of G.I.'s in the front, one with his carbine at ready.

"Good grass."

The standard, but true. Sort of a ritual to smoking. Like the Indians. Smoke, inhale deeply, pass the pipe or joint to a friend. (A sharing bond.)

"So what's hanging the deal up now?"

Woody relaxed, slumped, looked toward the Southern Cross low in the sky.

"He said that everything had been done that should be done. All the paperwork completed. Chaplain's statement. Consent of parents. Consent of Commanding Officer. Willingness of prospective bride and groom. Jesus Christ, everything, and still no orders. He said the only thing to do now is to wait for orders. As soon as they arrive, I'm on my way. But, the goddamned things haven't got here yet. I go down to the orderly room every morning. 'Any orders yet?' 'Sorry, Woody, no orders yet, man.' Son of a bitch. It's driving me up a wall."

"When's the baby due?"

"Two weeks! Jesus, just a little over two weeks! Two weeks and the old man is sitting on his ass in Viet Nam, smoking dope and waiting for orders!"

Woody laughed and there was a sharp edge of bitterness in his voice. He and Jean had been sweethearts for three years. Through most of high-school they were steadies. They had become lovers while Woody was on leave before shipping out for Viet Nam. After two months in-country

Woody had gotten a letter telling him that she was pregnant and assuring him that she didn't expect him to marry her. He had cried when he read that. Dumb broad. Of course he'd marry her. He intended to do that anyway, feeling that it would be better to get Viet Nam out of the way first, wait to see what might happen. Hell yes he was going to marry her. But that's where the red tape started getting in the way of his life. He deeply felt that they should have the ceremony before the baby was born. All that shit about technical bastard, etc., bothered the hell out of him.

"Did you ask to see the Colonel?"

"I saw him three days ago. He said he'd done everything he could do, signed everything, approved everything, that it was strictly in the hands of USARV and the Red Cross now. But, Christ, I'm really starting to get hassled."

There was a note of subdued urgency in Woody's voice.

"You'll make it, Woody. They all know that the time's getting short and that you have to get out of here. It'll happen. Stay positive."

They lit another joint and passed it. A gunship droned high overhead and started dropping flares in a semicircular pattern along the foothills. They'd be firing over there soon. Just as soon as they spotted movement they'd open up with six-thousand rounds per minute per gun. A tracer every five rounds. Red. Enjoyable to watch when you're stoned and abstracted and don't think too much on what's happening at the receiving end of that six-thousand rounds. The flares were beautiful. Not the bright, magnesium kind, but the soft, sharp yellow light. They hardly needed them with the moon.

Woody'd make it. Sam knew he would. The orders would show up in a few days. He'd be on his way home. For two weeks, maybe even a month, he'd be out of this ninety-nine per cent boredom, one-percent cold fear, then he'd be back to finish up his tour. Good old fucking Army. Clockwork. Bend over, we've got your orders. Yes, sir. Count the days. Try to get short. Nothing for it. Twenty-four hours in every day. Wait. Yes, sir.

TRACKIN' THE MILWAUKEE ROAD

I

They walked South, following the old bicycle trails just below the practice field. The Field, standing strangely pale and empty behind them in the light of an almost full moon, was covered at the edges with the shadows cast by small rocks. The trails covered a series of short, rolling hillocks, none more than eight feet in height from gulch to crest. The large hill to the Northwest of town showed as clearly as day in the bright luminescence. The road zagging up its face was clear and startling.

Both boys were wearing tennis shoes and Levi's. Tom wore a summer shirt and carried a loaded knapsack. Sam, wearing an old sweat-shirt, lugged a pack too. They both had heavy coats on, protection from the cool mountain wind which moved softly now, but could rise to biting in minutes and cut harshly across the valley.

"You sure you want to do this, Sam?"

"Ya. I'm sure. Aren't you?"

"Sure as I'm gonna be. It's just that I thought you might be bullshitting when you came by tonight. Christ, you were still half-blasted from Jerry's wedding reception."

"Well, I'm sober now, and I'm still sure."

They hiked steadily down toward the newly completed section of Interstate, the stretch empty and dead, traffic diverted now to the West along the old highway until the link-up section could be completed. The skeleton of a nearly finished overpass burned a black frame of shadow on the dusted light of the far roadway, coating the shoulder. They descended

from the last of the rolling trails, skidding in a small shower of loose rock, slipping safely to the bottom of the drainage and up to the newly paved surface.

"Man, isn't this something? Highway as far West as you can see and no goddamned cars!"

The new surface shot straight to a disappearing point two or three miles distant, losing itself over the brow of a large hill which had been nearly topped in the center, a gash cut between two steep walls to let the road out. The yellow center lines were dazzling, leading like arrows pointing to the high wall of mountains that lay fifty miles to the West. Behind them, at a distance of only several miles, the Continental Divide loomed up starkly in the eerie illumination. They had played as the children on that hill the highway cut. The old Orphan Girl gallows frame could be clearly seen to the north of the cut. There were old mine diggings there, old legends which children passed from one to the other, legends about boys disappearing around dark curves in the tunnel walls. They'd made torches out of damp newspapers and broken broom handles and fearfully explored some of those passages, more afraid of admitting fear to one another than afraid of the dark rock walls. The new highway had plowed into many of those old mine drifts, shoveling away the bright phantasy with the dark earth. The ground wind blew in gently from that direction. There were no clouds and the sky seemed to brighten as the vision lowered to the horizon in every direction, an inverted bowl with the apex high in the starry darkness and the edges in dim light.

"What time is it, Tom?"

"Almost one o'clock."

They crossed the asphalt and moved down, and then up, the far side of the shoulder, easily picking their way through the pebbles and scattered sagebrush on the flats descending the other side. They could see the tracks now, running perpendicular to the path they made directly towards the yards. At intervals they heard the sound of night birds off to their left close to a cluster of trees and clapboard houses. Nearer to the outskirts of town, as they were still descending city blocks, they had heard bats and seen them darting in parabolic dives to snatch moths under street lamps. The crickets added another fuzzy edge to the background, loud until approached, then hesitant and finally silent. As they walked parallel to the cluster of houses, a couple of mongrels began to bark. Barking, then silent to listen for their footsteps, then barking again.

"Goddamned dogs," said Tom. "If I had a good rock and some distance I'd teach them a lesson in telling plain walkers from thieves."

They were now following a dry watercourse about half a mile from the construction. The dogs quieted as they dropped South. They were able to move even more quickly, the sagebrush on either side framing the brightly lit sand ahead and at their feet. Another half mile ahead the first set of tracks gleamed with refracted moonlight. The Company owned that set. It ran ore cars from the mineral rich Hill, each car filled with high percentage copper, to the Smelter thirty miles West, almost at the base of those high, rugged mountains.

"Fucking Company."

"What, Sam?"

"Dirty, fucking Company."

"Oh. Ya!"

Moving to the right they left the watercourse, crossed a stretch of rock and sage and entered the tail of a wash which was centered by one set of rusted tracks. The tracks led beneath a wooden dock built of huge mine timbers parallel with each other a foot apart, at right angles to the track. It cast dark fingers across the wash. The dock served as a loading ramp for ore trucks, the weight of the rear wheels forcing the leading edge down over the tracks when used, the heavy scrap metal attached to the underside of the beams on the far side of the fulcrum pulling the dock upright to its permanent ninety degrees over the tracks when the truck pulled away. It angled stark and weathered as they passed beneath it. At the mouth of the wash the track split into a Y and joined the main line in two graceful metal sweeps. This spot represented a paralleling of the main lines of the Company railroad, the Union Pacific, the Great Northern and the Milwaukee Road, the Northern Pacific runnin' a like course half a mile South. They all East-Wested here. Sam had spent a lot of hours near here dreaming of all the places those tracks represented. They were a direct link with the exciting places he'd heard and read about. When he was a child he'd stand on one of the tracks and think that there, right there, he was standing directly in communication, a real yet untouchable communication, with Denver, San Francisco, Seattle.

"Which one we gonna take?"

"I think we wanta take the Milwaukee, Tom."

"Christ, do you know where it goes?"

"I'm not sure. This shit's new to me, too. I think it heads South for Denver. We'll just have to take a chance on it 'cause it's the easiest to hop. I got some friends in Denver that we can stay with while we look for jobs."

"Which one's the Milwaukee?"

"The far track. Come on, let's sit down and have a smoke and talk for a minute."

They moved to a small cup in the head of the wash and sat down facing the main line. They were between the two spurs of the Y. Tom pulled out a pack of Lucky's and offered Sam one.

"Thanks, Tom."

Sam lit a match and offered Tom a light, cupping his hand around the flame; then he lit his own. They smoked silently, shading the glow of the burning ends with their hands.

"Well, Tom, we've got a grand total of eight dollars and twelve packs of Lucky Strikes. Not a hell of a lot, but it could always be worse."

"Listen, Sam, I'm sorry I didn't have more than just three bucks and two packs of cigarettes. I wasn't expecting you to come by and suggest that we take off and hop a freight at this time of night!"

"I know. If we'd had it definitely planned we both could have laid something away for the trip. I don't think we did wrong in buying this carton of cigarettes. Both of us smoke and it shouldn't take but three or four days to get to Denver, then we can borrow a few bucks 'till we get work. 'Sides, there's not a hell of a lot to do on a freight train except ride and smoke."

Far up on the hill they could hear the whistle of a Company work train, laboring on steep grades to push empty ore cars into dim loading yards. The breeze had died to less than a whisper, but the night was getting cooler with the passage of the dark hours. Far down the tracks to the West, signal lamps gleamed their green message of no traffic. It was clear in both directions and the semaphores glowed like green

holes in the darkness.

"Are we gonna wait here for the train?"

"No. I think we'd best head across the trestle to the yards. The train stops there to put on extra units for the pull over the Rockies. That's probably the best place to jump aboard."

"Okay. Let's go."

They got up and walked onto the roadbed, stepping over the steel ribbons. They crossed to the last set of tracks and begin walking along them. They could see the long sweep of the track as it bent South and crossed over first the road and then high over the stream. The smell of creosote and oil was strong and the roadbed had retained a warmth from the long sun of the previous day. They trudged along, rounding the long bend, their feet making a crunching in the gravel spread between the darkened ties. The sound of an occasional car or truck came from the highway ahead, the light from their headbeams creating an unnatural glow above the ridge, outlining the cut through which they sped. When they reached the roadway, the boys went over to the guard-rail and leaned against it to rest for a moment. It was black where the overpass shut out the light of the moon, bright on the road where the moon touched.

"You ever piss on cars from here, Tom?"

"No. Did you?"

"A couple of times. One afternoon Ted Shaugnessy and I were down here and he took a shit on a beer can. He picked up the can and waited for a truck and when the truck was right under the overpass he twisted the can and the turd landed right on the driver's windshield. God, that was wild! The driver hit the airbrakes and pulled over down there on the right and jumped out. Christ, we ran like a son-of-a-bitch! We

were laughing so hard our sides hurt. We had enough of a head start that by the time he got to the top of the cut we were a couple of blocks away, running and laughing and giving him the finger. Jesus that guy was pissed off!"

"I thought Ted was a pretty straight guy."

A car passed loudly beneath them going West. They stood side by side facing that direction, leaning on the rail, one leg up on the lower bar watching the red tail light recede.

"Ya, he's straight, but there's a little bit of the wild man in everyone, including Ted. One Summer we were staying with his grandmother up at Hebgen Lake and because it was late in the year most of the other cabin owners in the area had left for the season. We'd go around and find a cabin with a window or door open and take any beer they might have laying around. We got drunker'n hell one evening and ended up beating the shit out of each other in about three feet of water just off the boat dock.

"Well I went to high school with him, you didn't. Sometimes he could be a real kissass; in talking with the teachers all the time. Christ, he didn't need to do that; he was smart anyway."

A car coming toward them with its beams on high caused them to turn aside. They could see each other even more clearly than in the moonlight. Both of them tall, Sam dark, dark hair and eyes, Tom fair, light hair and blue eyes. The car passed.

"Let's get goin'. It's almost two o'clock."

They continued down the tracks, looking now and then at the city and its lights on their left. The wind rose and they pulled their coats closer as they started across the trestle which traversed the stream. It

flowed noisely a hundred feet below them between the ties, one of the sources of the Clark Fork of the Columbia River, grew with the filth of mine waste and rank with the raw sewage of the city. This stretch of it passed through tall black wastes of slag that looked dark and uncanny in the moonlight. Further down on their right they could see the lights of the slaughterhouse which added its effluent to the mixture as the stream passed between settling ponds filled with the excess of the slaughter yards, overflow settling from pools of luminescent orange, red and blue.

They rounded the other long bend of the two mile S curve and headed past the small station house which served easily since the railroad had discontinued the Hiawatha passenger service. The cemetery lay on their right. One of the cemeteries. Neat plots, headstones in place, grass trimmed except for the stretch at the back of the grounds which contained the graves of Chinese who died before they were considered truly civilized. It was nothing more than a weed patch with the small markers in various stages of falling. There was somehow something dignified there that the well kept places lacked.

The tracks bent again to the South and they could see Timber Butte as they went. When the town was young that had been one of the chief suppliers of lumber, but it was bare, dead and denuded now except for scrub and the red airplane warning light at its summit. They approached the Milwaukee yards and the single track they had followed over the trestle began now to diverge into two, then four, then more and more tracks, each with more or less cars at various distances from them along their lengths.

"Come on, Tom, let's go down near the yard-house and see if we can find someplace to get some shut-eye while we wait for a train."

"That's the best idea you've had all night. I was tired after the reception and I'm a hell of a lot more tired now."

As they progressed through the yards the number of boxcars, flat cars, cars of every description increased. The yards were lit at regular intervals by lights hung from tall poles, taller than street lights, but the lights were no brighter. At the rough center of the yards was a building which housed the freight offices and the dispatchers station. The boys didn't want to be noticed, so they crossed over several tracks to the right of it until they reached the last set of tracks to the West of the yards. This track fronted the stockyards and the smell of roadbed and creosote were mixed with the smells of cow manure and hay and moist dirt. Tom had spotted a boxcar with the door open and it was empty.

"Here's a good one, Sam. Nice and dry and clean. We can hear the train when it comes in. Do you think there'll be one through tonight?"

The boys clambered through the wide opening into the car. With the moon directly overhead, the ground was bright but the inside of the car was shaded in gloom. It took a minute for their eyes to become accustomed to the inner darkness.

"I'm not sure, Tom. I know there's a train sometime in the morning, but it's Sunday and I don't know if they follow the weekly schedules."

Sam was physically tired, but he was mentally awake now and had been alert for some time. He heard the noises from the stockyard, took in the smells. Animals restless in their sleep, perhaps dimly disturbed by the sounds that came from the slaughterhouse as they awaited their

turn, perhaps not; maybe the sounds had no real affect on them one way or another. They threw their packs down just inside the door and each removed a blanket, spread it and lay down on the floor with the blanket rolled around them. Tom lit a cigarette and Sam did the same.

"Feel like talkin', Sam."

"I'm kind of tired right now, Tom. You probably are too. Let's just get some sleep tonight and we'll make our plans in the morning when we can see where we're headed a little better."

"Okay. Did you bring anything for protection, you know, just in case we run into something that gets rough?"

"I got a hunting knife, but I don't know what the hell I'd do with the son-of-a-bitch if I had to use it. Probably shit myself. But it's here in the pack anyway."

"Well, it's nice to have, anyway. You never know."

Tom snubbed out his cigarette, rolled over in his blanket, and was soon asleep. He was an easy sleeper. Sam finished his smoke and pulled the blanket up. Well, this was it. On the way at last. Kind of exciting, kind of frightening, but on the way. He lay thinking on things for a long while before he finally dropped into a light, light sleep.

II

They awoke slowly, almost painfully, in the cold and damp of first light. They'd only been asleep for several hours. Sam was stiff and his feet were cold. The sun cut through the open door at their backs, too bright to look into. Tom pulled his blanket more tightly around himself and rolled over to face Sam.

"Jesus! It's a cold son-of-a-bitch! What are we doin' here?"

"Aw, it'll warm up. Give it a little time. Right now, I'm hungry."

"There's an idea. Think we have time to get a bite to eat before the freight comes?"

"We'd better. No telling how long it'll be before we get another chance. We'll be able to see the train if it comes anyway. Let's just walk down Rowe Road and get something at Terry's."

They rolled their blankets up and put them into their packs. In front of them the penned animals were moving about in the stockyards. The slanting sun lit the bright green of the grass, the stark white of the barns and outbuildings. They hid their packs in the tall grass bordering the yards and headed across the tracks into the sun, climbing under cars or between them as they blocked their path.

"You think we'll have any problem with the yard-bulls, Sam?"

"Mike says that as long as you're not nosing around or breaking anything they don't bother you. According to him, some guys got it pretty bad from them during the Depression; some of them even killed. Guess their families found out about it and prosecuted and the railroads have kind of a hands-off policy now. It's just the Company Bulls who think it's still 1920."

"I hope you're right."

They reached Rowe Road and walked into the sun along the dusty shoulder, their shoes kicking up puffs of dust as they stepped. It was seven blocks from the yards to Harrison Avenue and Terry's was just around the corner on Harrison. When they reached Harrison the boys turned South and walked across the parking lot and went into the side entrance of Terry's. Walking to the back, they sat at a table next to a window that faced back to the yards. The table was covered with bright oilcloth, a vase of plastic flowers stood on the center. The waitress brought them each a menu. She looked grumpy and tired after an all-night shift.

"Coffee?"

"Please."

"Ya."

The boys concentrated on the menus.

"Whatya gonna have, Sam?"

"I don't know. Maybe ham and eggs. Do you get hash-browns and toast with it?"

"I think so. We'll check and make sure."

The waitress brought them coffee and left again. The steam curled from the cups and the smell was strong, black. They sipped and watched the cars cruise down Rowe Road, the sun sparkling off the chrome. The waitress returned.

"Well, what'll ya have?"

"Do you get hash-browns and toast with the breakfasts?"

"Sure. That's standard."

"Okay, I'll have 'the ham and eggs."

"How do you want the eggs?"

"Uh, over-easy, I guess."

"How about you?"

"Bacon and eggs and make the eggs sunny-side-up."

"That's it?"

"Ya. That's it."

She flipped her pad shut and walked toward the kitchen.

"How'd ya like to screw that?"

"I don't know. I think if she smiled her pants'd fall down."

"Ya. I'll bet her husband gets the hell out before she comes home in the morning."

"What the hell. She's probably had a tough shift. How'd you like to have to wait on wall-to-wall drunks from two to four every mornin'?"

"There's a point."

Sam got up and got a paper out of the rack next to the door. He sat down and gave half of it to Tom. They sipped their coffee and turned the pages, reading, glancing every now and then at the yards.

"Listen, Sam. They got Foxy Sullivan on an indecent exposure charge!"

"Jesus! Where?"

"Right behind the police station! Says he was relieving himself on a telephone pole when Officers Reed and O'Neill came out to go on patrol."

"Everything Foxy touches turns to shit. Poor bastard! I don't think he'll ever learn. What'd they do to him?"

"Fifteen dollars fine and 30 days suspended sentence."

"He'd better hold off pissing there for a month or so."

"If I know him he'll be back there tonight. Just to show them he can get away with it!"

"Fucking Foxy."

The waitress brought their breakfasts and refilled their coffees. The food was hot and tasted good to them. The boys ate hungrily, thinking that they might not have a chance for another meal for a couple of days. When they'd finished Sam payed the bill and Tom left a tip for the waitress. They walked back along Rowe Road, the sun hot on their backs as it rose higher in the bright morning. When they reached the yards they retraced their route through the cars back to the boxcar where they'd slept the night before. Tom got their packs out of the tall grass and they sat on the edge of the car in the open door smoking and watching the stockyards, the roof of the car shading them now.

In front of them a small black bull was busy pursuing an aged heifer in one of the holding pens. He would get close enough to try to mount her and she would kick out with her hind legs and trot away from her confused suitor. The boys smoked and watched this drama unfolding before them in the bright, fresh June sunlight. Every time the bull was refused he doggedly trotted after the cow until she stopped again and then he would begin his unsuccessful advances. Another refusal, and the cow would be off. The boys enjoyed this diversion, the two animals acting out their desires or lack of them, the rest of the cattle scattered around the pen listlessly watching from prone positions.

"Tell me that bull isn't fucked-up."

"How about that stupid cow? They'll probably knock her in the head in the next few days and here she is turning down pleasure while it's available."

"Well, for shit's sake, Sam, she doesn't know that."

"I know. It's too damned bad we couldn't just take her aside and

tell her that she'd better get it while she can because there ain't much time left for getting it at all."

"That little bull seems to know that."

"I'm not so sure. I get the distinct feeling he's just a horny little bugger."

The boys laughed, enjoying the entertainment the two animals were providing them with. Sam felt sorry for the little bull and the cow. They'd lead them to the slaughter in the next few days and they would be finished. It would be nice if you could tell them about it and let them spend the next few days running around in the pen with the knowledge that they had better make the most of their time. (That would probably change a few established habit patterns in a hurry.) But no, that was stupid. If you warned them it would only frighten them, just like it would frighten people. Might just as well leave them alone.

"I tell you, Sam, that little son-of-a-bitch just won't give up."

"Smart bull."

The little black bull continued pursuing his chosen, slacking his speed only to avoid her kicks then taking up the trail again. The sun climbed higher toward mid-morning and the heat increased. The sound of cicadas came from the taller grass that grew beside the tracks, making a constant background of sound for the morning. It was cool in the shade of the boxcar and a cool breeze flowed through the opened doors.

"Do you think we'll have any trouble making it to Denver?"

"We shouldn't, Tom, it's just a simple matter of catching the damned train and staying on it until we get there. The only hang-up is whether this train even goes to Denver. I'm going to figure that it does and we'll make our plans with that in mind."

"You said you had some friends there. Will they put us up until we get some work?"

"I'm sure they will. We lived there for a couple of years and had some good friends. All we gotta do is let them know we're in town and they'll take care of us. I'd do the same for them if they came to Butte."

"What the hell would they want to come to Butte for?"

"Aw, fuck you. You know what I mean."

"Well, do you think there's work there?"

"Jesus Christ, could it be any worse than it is here right now? We've both been hustling our asses off for any kind of work at all and all they've said is 'Sorry, man, can't help you. It's a tough year.'"

"That's true. My old man couldn't even get me on part-time at the Post Office. You know things are tough when they're even full for part-time helpers."

"Same with my old man. That's part of the trouble, I think. He's always been able to get us summer work before and now that it's so tough he feels bad. I guess he thinks we blame him. Shit, I know there's nothing he can do about it. The fucking Company says you can work underground if you want to, but I don't intend to spend this Summer a mile underground. I had enough of that crap last year. The kids'll get the shitty jobs and make the least money. I'd rather be outside this Summer. At least we'll be seeing something new by heading for Denver."

"Ya, I feel that way too. I'm a little sick of the old town. Didn't you say we might be able to get on haying up the Big Hole Valley?"

"Sure we can, but that's not until the first part of July and if we haven't got anything by then we can always head back and be there in time for the haying season. You can't make a hell of a lot of dough."

That's my only complaint about that job. Other than that it's a great way to spend six weeks. We'll see. If we can't find anything else, we can always keep that as an ace in the hole."

"There must be a recession goin' on."

"Christ, Tom, in this fucking town there's always a recession goin' on. It's a way of goddamned life. The people wouldn't know what to do if things got good. They're so goddamned competent under pressure now that a little prosperity would permanently cripple half of them. I think the fucking Company has a little, highly paid staff of depression experts working somewhere in the Hennessy Building making damned sure that there's a certain level of unemployment maintained so that the people don't ever get too damned certain where their next meal is coming from. Look what the dirty bastards are doing now. They can't get enough men who are willing to go underground, at least that's what they claim, I don't believe the bastards, so they're importing coal miners from West Virginia with bullshit promises of good conditions and high pay. Maybe for those poor bastards it is a better way to make a living, but what happens when the Company decides to lay off another couple of hundred men as they automate? Right. There's the poor goddamned West Virginian right at the head of the unemployment line. The only difference in his condition is that now he's unemployed in Montana instead of West Virginia. How those blood-sucking bastards can justify importing labor at a time when the town itself is running ten percent unemployed I'll never quite be able to understand."

"Why are the West Virginians willing to come out here, then? You'd think they'd rather stay where they were till things got a little better."

"That's the point, Tom. They're in the same bind we're in. Even worse. Those fucking coal mines are the worst thing in this country. If you think conditions are bad at the Mountain Con or Badger you oughtta read about those coal mines. I know we got corrupt unions, the Miner's Union is a great example, but they're pikers compared to those coal boys. Mine owners are still free to run things as if the days of the Captains of Industry had just flowered. Corrupt Union bosses walking hand in hand with the owners to fuck the miner. They steal from the pension funds, steal from the dues, steal from everything. The miner gets old, he gets sick: tough shit. They've no goddamned pensions, no union benefits, no goddamned anything. The Company's a babe in arms compared to those fucking sharks, but they're learning fast. One of their newest tricks is to use the strike as a means of screwing over the very men that the strike is supposed to benefit. When the strike's over they simply don't hire back the same number of men that were working prior to the strike. It enables them to get rid of another three or four hundred men at one slick swipe of their ass and the working man can't do a damned thing about it. Oh, sooner or later the miner will catch on and they'll make rehiring the same number of men a part of their bargaining, but by then the Company will have eliminated a couple of thousand jobs and those jobs will never be available again. So the town gets smaller and smaller and poorer, the Company gets richer and richer, and more and more families have their lives uprooted, disrupted, maybe even destroyed in some cases. (Fuck, it's just like Grapes of Wrath.)"

"Grapes of What?"

"You know, Grapes of Wrath, that book by Steinbeck about the Oakies during the Depression. One of the Companies latest tricks is to not hire

back those men who've got in almost enough time to qualify for a pension. A guy works eighteen, nineteen years for the buggers and a strike comes along, usually a strike that's begun for good reasons, and when it's over this guy doesn't have a job anymore. His whole life working for the bloodsuckers and they kick his ass out so they won't have to pay him a goddamned pension. Did I ever tell you the story about Finko Dunn?"

"No. Who in the hell is Finko Dunn?"

"You remember young Frank Dunn, you know, from CenterVille? He got killed rodeoing. He was riding a bronc while wearing a cast from his waist up for a broken back. Maybe a little crazy, but he was a fearless bastard."

"I know who you mean now. He had a couple of brothers, didn't he? I think Dan Dunn was his brother."

"That's right. Dan and Ben and a few younger brothers and sisters. Real nice kids. Well, Finko Dunn is their old man. A wonderful guy. He started out as a miner and he was a good one. Damned dependable. He worked at the old Original and came up to be a shift boss. His men respected the hell out of him. He'd work right alongside of 'em and treated 'em decently. If a man had problems Finko would try to help him out. He'd never fire a man for coming drunk, he'd just send him where the air was hot and work his ass off 'till he'd sweated it out. If a man had his work done he could sit down and take a smoke and Finko would never say another word about it."

"Where's the Original?"

"You know that gallus frame just across Main Street and down a couple of blocks from the Steward?"

"Ya. I know where that is. It's close to the Post Office."

"Right. That's the Original. They use it now for air and maintenance for the Steward, but it used to be a producer and that's where Finko Dunn did his work and shift-bossed. Anyway, like I said, Finko had his men's respect. He took care of them and they did the same for him. Things went that way for a couple of years and Finko's boys always met their production quotas and got the work done. He was one of the best liked shift-bosses on the hill. Then they had another strike. I don't know if it was '39 or '40, somewhere along in there, and Finko was in a bind. All his men walked off the job. They were on the other side of the fence. The Foreman told Finko that he was on the Company side now, 'cause the shift-bosses always helped maintain the mines during the strike. Finko thought it over for a couple of minutes. Christ, all that work and he'd made salary. He finally told the Foreman that his friends were on the other side of the fence and he'd be damned if he'd sit on his ass all warm and safe while his friends tightened up their belts to try to get a little better break on wages. He turned in his time-book and went through the gate and helped the pickets. Nobody asked him to do that. All his friends were amazed. They knew that the Company would blackball the poor son-or-a-bitch. They tried to talk him into going back in, but Finko said no, he'd take his chances."

"Shit, he must have known he was putting his ass in a bind, didn't he?"

Tom had shifted and was sitting facing Sam, smoking, his legs crossed Indian style. The sun was slowly rising towards noon. The breeze wasn't quite as cool and had died a little with the heat.

"Of course he did, Tom. I don't think he could help doing what he did. His father was one of the first miners to come here, way the hell

back in the 1880's, scraping up enough dough to send for his family. They were always working people, hard workers. Finko just couldn't stomach the idea of being with the opposition when it came to his friends. He'd taken the job so his family could have things a little better, but he always knew where his loyalties lay."

"You know that's a tough one. In one way I really respect him. You know, it takes a lot of guts to just take your chances that way. Christ, but he was really putting his head on the block."

"Exactly. That's the way it ended. The strike was eventually settled and the miners went back to work. There was a big demand for copper with the War coming on, but Finko Dunn had a problem."

"He was blackballed?"

"Right up shit creek. He couldn't find a job doing anything in this goddamned town. Small time stuff, part-time park here and there, but the Company wouldn't hire him and anyone who did big business with the Company had better not hire him either. That went on for a long, long time."

"Did he leave town for awhile?"

"I guess the poor bastard didn't know what to do. He was a miner, had been all his life, he'd gone down with his father when he was just a boy, it was all he knew how to do. He loved the work, all his friends, the boys he'd grown up with lived here and worked in the mines, all his relatives did the same."

"He must have finally gotten a break, huh?"

"One old timer told me that Finko's parish priest finally went down to the Hennessy Building and laid everything from A through Z on the big-shots, even threatened them with eternal damnation if they didn't ease up on Finko. He had a big family, they had to eat, had to go

to school, he told them that the Lord would surely get them if they continued to persecute Finko Dunn. Well, those assholes in the Hennessy Building have always been among those who believe that you can surely buy your way into heaven, so they did God a favor and eased up on Finko Dunn. They hired him as a days-pay miner and that's as high as he's been able to go even though that was over twenty years ago and he's one of the hardest working men on the Hill. The good old generous Company gave Finko a break."

"Jesus. What a bunch of bastards."

"Wait, Tom! That ain't the end of the story. The best, or worst part is yet to come. Now get this. Finko's youngest son was named Steve. I guess he was a beautiful little kid, smart and happy and rambunctious. Finko doted on the little kid."

"What do you mean 'doted'? Did something happen to him!"

"Do you remember when we were in grade school when that little kid drowned in Touchette's swimming pool?"

"Ya! I remember. Was that Finko's little kid?"

"It sure as hell was. Charming goddamned Touchette, big-shot in charge of Western Operations for the Company, big fenced in house inside the mine-yard, big swimming pool for his pleasure, big shit heel. Finko's kid and one of his pals snuck over the fence to look at the pool, something little kids from the Hill read about, an outdoor pool, just like the Country Club, and the poor little shit fell in and drowned. His pal ran home and told Finko's wife Mary, but there was nothing could be done by then. She ran down there, they got the foreman from the mine, he called Touchette, they got ahold of Finko underground. Broke their hearts. It wasn't Touchette's fault. I suppose with hindsight it would have been best to have covered the pool when it wasn't in use,

but the damned thing was fenced in and there wasn't much more you could expect anyone to do. Touchette was really upset. He cried and told Finko that if there was anything he could ever do for Finko or his family all Finko had to do was ask and if it was in his power he'd do it in a minute. Finko knew that nothing was going to bring Steve back, he didn't blame Touchette, he chalked it up as one of those horrible things life saves up for you and took Mary home. Later on Touchette had them fill in the pool with cement and turned it into a patio."

Tom shook his head. "That must have really broken them up. Were they able to handle it pretty well?"

"Yes. They have a strong family. They're very close. Like the old Irish families, like all the immigrant families. At one time Finko was drinking heavily, far too heavily. Mary kept after him, not nagging but gently, to cut down a little on the booze. One night he was sitting at the kitchen table drinking whiskey, loading quite a bit of grog aboard. Mary said something to him and his temper snapped. He threw a cup at her and hit her on the forehead with it and cut her. When he saw what he'd done it worked on him like a slap in the face. He saw where the drinking was leading him. That the last time he ever drank. He's been on the wagon ever since that night. He doesn't even drink a beer now and then."

"There must be a lot of love there."

"Sure there is." Sam pulled his knees up to his chest and was quiet for a minute, thinking of Finko Dunn.

"Well, the strike comes along again in '59, you know what a son-of-a-bitch that one was. The old-timers say it was the worst of a long line of bad ones. When it finally ended, months and months and months after it

started, Finko found himself out in the cold again. The Company didn't hire him back. He was really in a bind this time, almost twenty years good time in, another few months of good time and he's eligible for his pension and the fucking Company's playing with his life again. He hung on for a few months, he was close to sixty at that time, and finally figured that he'd better talk to Touchette and see if he could help him. It was a hard thing for him to do. He's not a man who lightly asks favors. He would never accept charity, all he wanted was honest work, he was strong and still had some productive years in him. So, he swallows his pride, goes up to the Hennessy building and asks to see Touchette. They keep him cooling his heels for a couple of hours, then Touchette has him shown in. There's Touchette behind that big mahogany desk, big, fat, well-fed, self-satisfied Touchette. Finko tells him his problem, reminds him that he said if he could ever do Finko a favor just to call, and Finko is now calling. Touchette puts on a bland smile, lifts his hands helplessly, and tells Finko that there is nothing he, Touchette, can do at this time for Finko Dunn. His hands are tied, times are tough, we all just have to tighten our belts. Finko is mortified, embarrassed and mortified for the man's hypocrisy. He controls his temper and walks out of the office."

"You've gotta be kidding. This really happened?"

"Every last fucking bit of it. Right down to that charming, scotch-guzzling bastard Touchette turning Finko away. Oh, he eventually got back on, he's got too many good friends in this town who won't let him down. Someone probably got Touchette's wife to go to bat for Finko. She's definitely the better half of that son-of-a-bitch."

"What's he doing now? Is he still working on the Hill?"

"Sure. He's working days-pay on the surface at the Steward. He's

old now, not as strong as he used to be. Not as able to stand up to the bastards as he used to be, but he's still one of the finest men I've worked with. He's got a great sense of humor, can laugh at his own problems. When I look at him and then at Touchette, I think I'd rather be Finko Dunn. He still owns his soul."

The sun was directly overhead now. It was getting warm in the boxcar. The cicadas were a soft, constant lulling background. Timber Butte shimmered bare and stark in the noonday heat, a few green shrubs on its sides leading to the flat, rocky top. Both boys lay on their backs, resting, thinking, waiting for the train.

III

In the somnolent haze of early afternoon Sam passed between sleep and waking, dozing and then starting, but not quite to full wakefulness. His hearing focused on single entities, picking one sound out of others which would enter his consciousness at a barely perceptible level. The drone of a fly passing through the open doors of the boxcar entered the threshold of marginal sound, grew in passing and faded. The switchengine had finished its work and at the far South end of the yards four deisel units stood waiting to be hooked up to the expected freight for the haul over the Continental Divide, their exhaust rising thinly, almost cleanly into the heated air of past noon. Images passed through his napping, his father and mother, his brother Mike, between them and more often, Laura, her face sometimes etched eerily, sunspotted, centered nebulously in haze, again, distinctly, clearly in mental focus. He found it almost impossible to clearly reconstruct faces when totally awake, but in sleep or semi-sleep the facial image would present itself with a startling clarity at times. Sometimes places would suddenly focus sharply, as if he stood in the middle of some scene that he had experienced, or seen, or dreamed about. At times some of his dreams seemed precogniscent, showing him some small piece of earth or hill or meadow which he would later come upon in walking or driving, wondering if he had really constructed it earlier or whether he had been there as a child or even seen a picture of some distant time which had submerged itself in his subconscious. He could see Laura's face again. She was sad, unhappy about something. Sam wanted to reach her, touch her, comfort her, find out what was the matter. She began to cry, the cry turning to a soft, constant moan. As he fought through the transition from sleep to waking, the moan continued, becoming

the sound of a train whistle in the distance. He blinked, trying to remember the faces of his dream, those faces disappearing, igniting, blowing away within seconds after waking, gone. He shook his head. He was warm, physically uncomfortable in first consciousness. He lost the thread of the low moan his mind had refused to instantly relinquish and now clearly heard the short, long, and two short blast repeated by the lead unit of the freight.

"Tom! Tom! Come on, man, wake up!"

Tom had fallen asleep on his side. Sam shook his shoulder to wake him.

"Come on, Tom, Wake up! The train's coming!"

UP ON THE HILL

"This is the shits. The whole damned town's dead."

"Pass the beer, would ya?"

The quart bottle was lifted, the beer bubbled out. The car turned at the end of the "drag" and headed for one more run.

"I don't believe it. Usually there's at least a couple of "hooks" walkin' on Park Street. This is fucking depressing."

They stopped for a light. The rain had almost completely dried from the streets, but it was still cool going along Broadway.

"Broad Way! What a bunch of bullshit that is!"

"Hey, Hank, let's take one more turn down Park. Go by the High-School."

"Okay."

The car wheeled left a block, turned left again on Park and cruised slowly along the right lane.

"Look, Jerry! A couple of broads by the High-School!"

"Score City, Tim!"

Hank geared the car to an even slower pace as they cruised toward the two girls who were walking easily along the sidewalk.

"Jesus Christ, you guys, it's Suzy Rottencrotch and Open Pit Alice. Holy jumpin' free pieces of ass!"

"Pull over, Hank, Jesus, pull over. Tim, roll down your window, I'll do the talkin'."

They pulled over to the curb alongside the two girls, keeping pace with them as they continued walking.

"Hey, Suzy, Alice, what ya doin'?"

The girls glanced at the car, but continued walking.

"We're just walkin'," said Suzy, "what are you guys doin'?"

"Ridin' around, drinkin' some beer. Listen, why don't you guys hop in and take a ride with us?"

"We don't know you guys very well," said Suzy, "who are your friends?"

By this time the girls had halted and the car stood at the curb by their side, motor softly running, as the guys made their play.

"This is Tim Fredericks. Hank Fields is drivin'."

"Hank who?"

"Fields. He plays football, maybe you heard of him?"

At the word "football" both of the girls brightened.

"No shit? You really play football?" Alice asked.

"Ya. Hank's defensive linebacker for the Wildcats. I used to play, too," said Jerry, "before I got hurt."

The girls wiggled a bit and warmed up to the conversation, looking across the boys with new interest at Hank.

"Whaddya say? Want to come with us?"

"I don't know if we should," said Suzy.

"Aw, come on. We're just goin' up on The Hill for awhile and drink some beer and shoot the bull. Come on."

Tim reached around and opened the back door of the car, inviting them in.

"What do you think, Alice? Should we take a quick ride?"

"I don't give a shit."

"Will you guys bring us home when we ask you? I can't stay out too late, 'cause it's a school night."

A chorus of "sure, right, ya!"

The girls got into the back seat and Tim swung the door shut after them. Hank pulled the car out into Park Street, turned left at Utah,

left again on Broadway and headed West toward The Hill.

Jerry popped the cap from another quart of beer and handed it back to the girls. Open Pit Alice grabbed it and sucked noisily from the squat bottle.

"Shit, I love beer. Here, Suzy, have a swig."

Suzy demurely took a swig as the car slowed and turned right up Prospect, running smoothly to the sound of the radio and the voices within. The night had warmed a bit and the moon showed first-quarter in the West. The street lights whizzed by and the beat of the music seemed good to them.

"We'd better stop for some more beer, Hank. You guys want some more beer?"

"Sure!"

"Hell, yes!"

"Pull over at the M & B, Hank. I think I can get served there."

Hank swung the wheel, stopped, and Jerry ran up the stairs and into the M & B, clutching a collection of dollar bills in his hand.

"How does that goddamned Jerry always get served," said Tim, "they always take one look at me and laugh their asses off."

"Aw, his hairline's receded and that always makes ya look older," said Hank.

"Listen, Suzy, why don't you come up front with Hank and me, and Jerry and Alice can sit in back? What do ya say?"

"What do ya think, Alice? Should we switch?"

"I don't give a shit."

Suzy opened the door, stepped out at the same time Tim did, got back in front and slid over into the middle of the seat. Tim closed the back door, got in himself and slammed the front door.

"Want a piece of gum, Suzy?"

"Sure, Tim. What kind ya got?"

"Juicy Fruit. Here. How about you, Alice?" said Tim.

"Why not."

Hank gunned the engine as Jerry came out of the M & B. He saw the new situation and jumped into the back seat clutching the sack full of bottles.

"Way to go, Jere! How much did you get? Did he ask you for an ID?"

"No, man. No sweat. He thought I was legal. Even bullshitted with him awhile. Got eight quarts."

"Way to go, man!"

Hank squealed back onto Prospect, hit it for two blocks, slowed, and floated onto the dirt road winding up to The Hill.

"Jesus, they ought to pave this son-of-a-bitch."

"Christ, Tim, it wouldn't be the 'boonies' if everything was paved."

Jerry popped two of the cold, wet quarts, handed one to Alice, and the other to Tim. "Pass it around, buddy!"

"Right, Jere!"

Tim took a big swig, wiped his mouth, and handed the bottle to Suzy. Open Pit Alice was swigging it down in the back seat like a thirsty trooper.

"Here, Suzy, take a drink and pass it to Hank. Jesus, that beer tastes good! This is the only way to fly! How's it goin' back there, Jerry?"

"Christ, I have to fight Alice for a drink. Come on Alice, give me a drink would ya?"

"Oh, all right. Here."

Hank guzzled with one hand and guided the car up the winding dirt road with the other. They passed by a spot used by the kids of town as a place to park and drink.

"There's Gobbler's Knob, you guys. Wonder if anyone's getting any?"

Everyone laughed. The beer was having its good effect. Tim put his arm around Suzy. Jerry and Alize haggled over the bottle in the back. Hank drove and drank, pulling the car over dips and around pot-holes in the road, splashing water into the yellow of the headlights and off into the sagebrush.

"Listen, why don't you turn left up here, Hank? There's a hell of a good spot about a half-mile further. Kind of a level spot where no one can see the car."

Hank found the road and took the turn neatly, pulling the wheel to the left to the sound of popping gravel. They increased the volume on the radio and let the cool night breeze pull through the car.

"Come on, Alice. Give me a goddamned drink."

"Hey, Jere. Pass another jug up front, our's is empty."

"Want some more beer, Suzy?"

"Sure."

Hank found the open spot and pulled the car in smoothly and stopped.

"This okay?"

"Right."

He shut out the lights, revved the engine and turned the ignition off.

"I've never been here before."

"Come on, Suzy, you've been to every parking spot in the county!"

"Shit, I've been here a couple of times," said Alice.

"You can't see the lights of the city from here."

"Ya, but nobody's goin' to be botherin' you either."

They drank for a few minutes, listening to the radio, enjoying the feeling the beer was producing, smoking, the ends of cigarettes glowing and dimming, an undercurrent of sexual excitement. Outside the car crickets were making their noise and the stars glittered in the rain-freshened sky.

Hank put his hand on Suzy's leg and started to softly rub her thigh. Tim was on the other side with his arm around her shoulders and he began rubbing her breasts with his free hand. It was very quiet in the car, except for the radio.

"I have to take a piss you guys," said Alice.

"I'm not surprised," said Jere.

He opened the back door and Alice jumped out and headed toward a small knoll some distance away from the car.

"Want me to come and hold your hand?"

"Up yours."

She was gone.

"Listen, you guys," said Suzy. "I know what you want tonight, but I can't help you I'm having my period. But, if you want to get Alice, when she gets back just tell her that I took my clothes off while she was gone and now she has to do the same."

"And she will?"

"Sure."

"That's unreal."

"What do you say, Hank, Tim, shall we gang-bang her?"

"I don't know," said Tim.

"Well, what the hell," said Hank, "as long as she's willing."

"Firsts!"

"Seconds!"

"Shit."

Suzy just laughed.

"Come on, Hank. Get in the back seat with me and we'll both work on her when she gets back.

Hank jumped out of the car and whipped open the back door and got in across from Jere. Jere had yelled "firsts" and Hank "seconds". Tim remained in the front seat, sharing a bottle of beer with Suzy.

"Hank and I'll do it first," said Jere, "and then we'll get out and you get in the back. Okay, Tim?"

"Ya. Sure. I guess so."

Alice was returning from the knoll, tucking in her blouse as she walked.

"Here she comes!"

"Remember, just tell her I had my clothes off," said Suzy.

Jere opened the door for Alice. She stepped into the car and Jere followed her.

"Have some more beer, Alice," said Hank.

"Hey, Alice," said Jere, "Suzy just took her clothes off for us, how about you?"

"That's right, I did," said Suzy.

"So what? Why should I take my clothes off?"

"Aw, come on Alice. Be a sport. Suzy took hers off. Come on. You'll enjoy it."

Alice unbuttoned her blouse and took it off. She unhooked her bra and Jere helped her out of it. The boys stared, wide-eyed. She had a beautiful body. Both Jere and Hank kissed her stomach and caressed her hips and thighs. Suzy started giggling. Alice began panting softly.

Tim drank some more beer. Jere got on top of her and the other three watched as he began to work. Suzy kept giggling at the sounds of active sex. Jere moaned and had his orgasm. He moved off her and, her legs still spread, Hank took his place and began pumping. The other three watched and Suzy giggled. Jere pulled his pants back up and buckled them. Hank came with a shudder and rolled off. Alice remained laying on the back seat, her skin glistening in the faint light.

"Your turn, Tim."

Tim opened his door and he and Suzy got out. Jere and Hank both got out of the back seat. Hank was tucking in his shirt and Jere walked away to relieve himself. Tim closed the front-seat door, got into the back seat, and closed the back door. He sat on the back seat and looked at Alice, spread naked in the dim light.

"Well? What are ya waiting for? Do ya want some?"

Tim hit her.

"Jesus Christ, Tim," said Hank, wrenching open the door, "what the hell are you doing? Why'd ya hit her?"

Alice had her hands to her face and was softly cursing: "Wait 'till Nick gets you, you bastard. I'm going to tell Nick."

"Christ, I don't know. I just got psyched-up. She was laying there all spread out and, Jesus, I don't know. Fuck, I shouldn't have hit her. Are you all right, Alice?"

"I'm going to tell Nick, you bastard."

"Listen, Alice, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hit you."

"Fuck you, buddy, Nick'll kick your ass."

There was a small spot of blood on Alice's lip where Tim's knuckle had struck.

"Look, Alice, I told you I'm sorry. What do you want me to do, kiss

your ass?"

Jere came up from the weeds and laughed when he saw what had happened.

"Jesús, you hit her Tim? Ha! That's out of sight!"

Tim got out of the car, grabbed a quart of beer and leaned against the trunk of the car, guzzling, head lifted back. Suzy got in the back with Alice.

"Shit, she's not hurt," said Jere, "it's just a little cut."

"Wait 'till I tell Nick."

"Who in the hell is Nick?"

"He's my boyfriend."

Jere whooped: "Keerist! You're going to tell your boyfriend that some guy that was about to screw you at a bunch-punch hit you? Wow! That's too much! I don't believe it!"

Alice snuffled.

"Would you guys take us home?" said Suzy. "It's getting late and we should be going."

"Sure. Come on you guys, let's go. Party's over."

The three boys got back into the car. Hank started the engine and the big car backed and wheeled onto the road, returning in the direction they had come. Alice had quit sniffing, but was still cursing everyone, especially Tim, mumbling that Nick would avenge her. Tim swigged the last of the quart and threw the bottle out the window into the sage.

Listen, Alice," he said quietly, "I'm sorry. I don't really know why I hit you and I'm sorry as hell I did. Don't threaten me with what's-his-name, because that doesn't really matter. I'm sorry."

"See," said Jere, "he didn't mean it Alice, and he's sorry. Don't

be sore. Let bygones be bygones. What d'ya say?

"Ya, come on, honey," said Suzy, "he's sorry and you shouldn't hold a grudge. Those things happen when you're drinking."

"Well, goddammit, it still hurts," said Alice.

Hank speeded down Prospect, headed for town.

"Well, what do you say, is everything all right?"

"Ya, it's okay, isn't it Alice," said Suzy.

"Maybe. Gimme some more beer before you let us out."

"Where do you want us to let you out?"

"How about the Greasy Spoon," said Suzy.

"Great," said Alice.

Hank drove quickly across town on Park, right on Main and pulled over in front of the Greasy Spoon.

"Here we are, you guys: the Greasy Spoon. Can you make it from here?"

"You bet your ass," said Alice, getting out of the car. Her lip was a little swollen, but otherwise none the worse for wear.

"Ya, this is fine," said Suzy, "thanks for the ride."

"Ya, ya, thanks, we'll see you guys later. Good night."

Hank wheeled away from the curb, leaving the two girls on their way into the drab cafe.

"Christ. What a night! Why did you punch that old slut, Tim?"

"I don't know. Fuck it. Forget about it. Let's go home."

"How about you, Jere, you ready to go home?"

"Ya, shit, it's almost twelve and we have to be up early. Let's go."

"Boy, did you screw up, Tim," said Hank. "That broad may be ugly, but did you see that body? Man, I couldn't believe it! She was a great

"Man, I thought she was goin' to screw my eyes out!"

"Right. Why don't you guys tell each other about it after you drop me off."

"Don't be sore at us, Tim."

"Aw, I'm not sore. It's been a fucked up evening. Let's go home."